

CULTURE OF FEASTS TODAY: DIFFERENCES OF INTERPRETATIONS *

The feast

Christmas, Easter and Whitsun are our biggest Christian feasts. This list now not only reflects the chronology but also shows the order of importance in religious practice. In other words, Christmas has become our biggest feast, followed by Easter that has been eclipsed by it, while Whitsun hardly registers at all. But it was not always so. In the early Christian world at first only the Resurrection was celebrated. It was only from the end of the 4th century that Christmas gradually became a feast day. Theologically, Easter is still the greatest Christian feast.

Today many forms of the celebration of church feasts can be observed in Hungarian society. The feast is a special time, different from the accustomed, everyday that can only be understood in the context of everyday life. Abundance, a positive attitude to life and the exceptional are all part of the feast. The most important social and cultural function of the feast is that it *gives order to time*. It is characterised by *ritualisation*. That is, the feast is structured time, it has a beginning and an end. It is an occasion for forms of *ceremonial* behaviour and is characterised by the general features of ritual behaviour (formality, the wearing of masks, occasional role exchange, disorderly behaviour).¹ The person celebrating a feast rises above the everyday, steps out of the accustomed time, exceeds the spatial and temporal limitations of existence. The celebration of feasts opens wider connections and relativises the world of work and the everyday.² The feast is an exceptional time when we rejoice at the whole of life because we rejoice at one stage of it.

Feasts can also have an important role in our post-modern world and complex society: the feasts ensure the flow of formative (regulating, shaping) knowledge within the group and within society. Repetition in the feast abrogates the difference between “was” and “is”.³ The feast enables the individual to become one with himself. The feast brings together existence on two time planes: the vertical time of the feast and the horizontal time of everyday life.⁴

Does our investigated feast, Easter, function this way?

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1 LEACH 2000. 101. On role exchange, see also: VAN DER LEEUW 2001. 340.

2 Nyíri 1975. 140.

3 ASSMANN 2000. 193.

4 ASSMANN 2000. 194.

The research

In my short paper I would like to give a brief overview of the celebration of Easter today, drawing on the data of a research project on continuous time. Since 1993 I have asked my university students to write a description of how they spent their own Easter in that year, with their family, alone or with friends. Methodologically, the work mainly involves observation: attention must be paid, according to the criteria given, to the preparations on the spiritual/religious and profane levels, to the succession of events of the celebration, the religious and non-religious celebration, to the fixed texts of the feast (Easter greetings and “sprinkling” verses), to the judgement of the feast, to the attitude of the person writing the report, and all this must be recorded in diary form.

I now have over 200 such descriptions, covering the geographical area of present-day and historical Hungary. Naturally, the greatest number are from Szeged and vicinity, but there are also numerous descriptions from Slovakia, Transylvania (Romania) and Sub-Carpathia (Ukraine).

Most of the descriptions are a precise and concrete record of the Easter in a given year, with varying degrees of retrospect to past, childhood memories. Analysis of these descriptions allows us to observe and record certain trends.

1. The religious celebration

In religious families the preparation for Easter begins with Lent following the church rules. The religious feasts and commemorations from Ash Wednesday to Easter give the frame for this. The profane preparations and customs are in harmony with it. Regular visits to church on the Sundays in Lent and avoidance of noisy festivities belonged in this group. The main emphasis is on the celebration of the three holy days (Easter Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Saturday), followed by the Easter Resurrection procession and ceremony. The custom of sprinkling girls with water or perfume on Easter Monday is mentioned with the same emphasis. This is an indication that not only the religious but also the profane tradition is important.

The concrete preparations are made on several levels: spiritual preparations, spring work to tidy the garden as the task of the man/father, spring-cleaning and cooking/baking as the work of the women/girls; in rural areas the preparations can also include whitewashing the home. Shopping for the feast is now a bigger event than in the past, although less so in villages than in cities. The division of work within the family is important.

In this group Easter is the celebration of the Resurrection. Parallel with this it is also the resurrection of nature; this is expressed in the cleaning and gardening that are always part of the preparations. Easter is also a feast of the immediate and wider family, so sending postcards also has an important place among the

preparations. Besides the traditional postcard, people now also send SMS messages and Internet postcards.

Good Friday is a part of Lent with dishes that differ from one region to another. Lent is observed in many Calvinist families too. In many places people go to church in traditional festive dress (in black clothing).

Easter Saturday is the time of cooking and baking. It is the day of the Resurrection ceremony, for Catholics the procession to which people take candles.

Easter is also a family feast. On Easter Sunday the immediate family are together, on Monday the wider family and acquaintances meet in connection with the custom of sprinkling. People who have moved away from the community or village also return home – this is reflected in the number of visitors to the church. In some places a “sprinkling ball” is held on Sunday evening.

Although Easter is principally a feast of the living and life, we learn from numerous descriptions that Easter week is a time to tidy graves, Good Friday or Easter Sunday and Monday are a day for visiting the cemetery or for sending wreaths to the graves. The notion of Good Friday certainly also plays a role in this, as well as the feast of the Easter of the dead observed by Greek Catholics and Orthodox.

The festive meat dishes of Easter Sunday are served already after the Resurrection ceremony on Easter Saturday evening, but in some places only after the blessing of food on Sunday morning. The blessing of food is no longer practised in many places; the descriptions mention it only in a few settlements in Northern Hungary and Transdanubia, it is not customary on the Great Plain. The composition of the foods to be blessed is determined locally, but everywhere it includes ham, eggs and milk bread. The festive menu may differ locally but it is characterised by the abundance of celebration. In places, Easter as a feast is also a day of representation for the introduction of certain new dishes. Painting eggs is a general practice; it is mainly the task of older girls using either factory-made dyes or traditional procedures.

Nowadays an important element in the preparation for Easter is the decoration of the home with ornaments radiating an atmosphere of spring and Easter. They include figures of rabbits and chickens made of different materials, twigs of pussy willow, spring branches and flowers. Painted eggs are hung on the twigs of pussy willow that has been blessed on Palm Sunday to make what is called an egg tree.

Giving gifts at Easter is frequent but not general. It is customary mainly in families with children. Where it is the custom, it is said that the Easter Bunny brings the gifts. The time of giving varies: from the hours after the Easter Resurrection procession to the morning of Easter Monday. Making a nest and hunting for the gifts are part of the giving. Earlier it was the godparents who gave gifts on this occasion.

Fewer people now go to church on Easter Monday, indicating that the religious nature of this day has weakened.

Sprinkling is a general custom on Easter Monday; according to the descriptions this is the main element of the day. Besides the locally traditional Easter dishes, visitors are offered cakes and drinks. The Easter sprinkling verses do not generally reflect the religious character of the feast.

In the opinion of those who celebrate in a religious way, Easter is the feast of Resurrection, the renewal of the human soul and the beginning of spring. It can be observed however that the celebration is shifting from the religious content to a family event. Gift-giving has now become important, obviously not unrelated to the culture of consumption. As a feast it is an occasion for change, for the introduction of new dishes.

All the descriptions from Hungarian families living in the neighbouring countries tell of the religious nature of the celebration, indicating that there religion plays a greater role in shaping individual and communal/ethnic identity than in the territory of today's Hungary. The descriptions stress the recovered religious nature of the feast in the post-socialist countries. The practice of sprinkling can strengthen not only the family nature of the feast but also the cohesion of the community.

2. Celebration of a non-religious nature

Celebration of a non-religious nature differs from the former in that the religious features or the religious content are absent. One reason for this is that for decades the channels for the transmission of religious knowledge were restricted. The cleaning and the spring celebration character are still found. However, in places the traditional profane elements (dishes) are found here too. In this form of celebration the emphasis is on abundant festive food and on the Monday sprinkling. The whole Easter preparation is concentrated on Easter Monday. They do not know about or do not recognise the religious nature of the feast.

Many of the descriptions contain memories of the religious and traditional celebration of the grandparents and the way in which the present celebration differs. In many families the painting of eggs becomes the most important celebration and with this they feel that they have carried on the tradition. People still send postcards for the occasion, strengthening the nature of Easter as a family celebration. Preparations in the kitchen and cleaning are left for Easter Thursday and Good Friday. The church rules for Lent are not observed.

Easter Sunday is a time for visiting relatives, receiving guests, painting eggs, visiting the cemetery or resting at the weekend house.

Easter Monday is the time for sprinkling and receiving guests. The sprinkling on Monday is the high point of the celebration. It is a good opportunity for courting. In some places people are expected to visit their relatives, neighbours and friends to sprinkle the women.

Gift-giving is found here too.

The opinion of this group on Easter is complex and varied. For one person it means nothing more than receiving guests, the special festive dishes: eggs and ham, and sprinkling. Many people regard the visits and sprinkling as superfluous because it involves a lot of work and expenditure. For many people, compared to Christmas and birthdays, Easter is an insignificant feast. Its essence lies mainly in the festive table.

3. Rejection of the feast

There is a part of society that does not observe Easter in any way, observing the occasion with an action substituting the rite (an excursion). The rejection of the celebration can also be found in this attitude.

Often the nature of family celebration is also missing. Although the painted egg is the symbol of the feast, it is often the rejection of the outward forms, in particular the sprinkling, that undermines the feast. Many people feel that the sprinkling is a backward, peasant custom, something to be ashamed of. As one girl wrote: "the feast is killing itself precisely because of its own characteristic". In these families Easter Sunday is an occasion for rest. On Monday acquaintances visit each other. But many people go away from home to avoid having to respect the norms of the feast. Others go out for hikes.

Many people feel that even writing postcards is a burden. But on the days before Easter they place objects symbolising spring on the table: a basket of grass, flowers or branches from a flowering fruit tree in a vase, eggs and chocolate figures on the table.

According to this group Easter is not important, it is a quiet, slow, family and community celebration, a time for laughter and merriment. It serves to cultivate ties with family and friends.

Summing up

One of our questions is whether the structure of celebrations is changing in the post-modern age, in the age of globalism, and if so, how? We are examining the celebration of church feasts which are becoming secularised as profane, non-religious elements are coming to dominate them. At Christmas and Easter the predominance of elements of the consumer culture indicates the emphasis on outward show for prestige.⁵

⁵ Research theme of Gábor BARNÁ. Cf. ERDÉLYI 2004, BARNÁ 2006. As theoretical background see: MOORE – MYERHOF 1977.

The descriptions essentially reveal three forms and tendencies in interpretation of the feast that are in a state of constant flux with many possible transitional variants:

1. The *celebration of a religious character*, aspects of which are naturally determined by the denominations, may therefore differ and there are also differences between town and country. Special features can be found in a comparison of present-day Hungary and the territories lost after the First World War (Sub-Carpathia, Transylvania). Their main characteristic is celebration according to church norms, linked with traditional elements of rites and customs outside the church.

2. *Celebration of a non-religious character* which differs from the previous in that the religious features or religious content is absent, but the traditional profane elements of the celebration are present in varying degrees. In content it contains desacralised rites. The main period in the shift from the first to the second group was in the 1960s-1970s.

3. The *rejection of the feast*, or its non-celebration. Easter is not observed but is replaced with other rites or actions substituting rites (excursions). This attitude expresses rejection of the feast and its celebration.

We have been able to observe religious and non-religious forms of the celebration of Easter, and we also encountered the rejection of the feast. However, there are cases of non-religious celebration when certain elements of the religious symbolism still function. Indirectly, it may be true that the greater part of the population hold themselves to be religious, but they do not practise their religion in everyday life, only in its feasts. Differences between generations can be observed and even generational differences within families. The fact that all the data from outside Hungary speak of celebration of a religious nature indicates that religion has an ethnic role in the separated territories, and hence it plays a greater role in the preservation and continuous reconstruction of customs, community and identity than in Hungary.

As one university student wrote, the greater social mobility of recent decades, particularly migration to the towns and the accompanying change in the system of social connections is the principal cause of the loss of religion and the disappearance of customs. The process itself is reflected in the simplification of the system of customs. This can be seen mainly in the culture of dress and the loss of its earlier meaning. Among the festive symbolism, the rabbit, egg and pussy willow branch have clearly become symbols of Easter. From the feast itself it is mainly the festive meals, the abundance and elements of representation in the celebration that have survived with the possibility for introducing innovations. The quantity is influenced by the number of guests, that is, by the system of social relations behind the feast. The meals are influenced very little by religious rules. It can be said that family ties are cultivated continuously. The postcard, which meant a bilateral connection, was an important means of cultivating social relations. It is being increasingly replaced by the Internet postcard services. Easter is

an occasion for giving small gifts to children. However, the once traditional ball has almost entirely disappeared as part of the feast, or at least its connection to the occasion has become much looser.

Easter has lost its denominational and even its strong religious connection. The ban on the celebration of religious occasions no longer exists, but generations have grown up under socialism without religion. Many people are now trying to create their own forms of celebration, often bringing back the religious nature. They are seeking expressive symbols, the essence of the feast and its function for themselves and their family. And many people find this in material symbols, in painted eggs, flowers and food.

Summing up my overview it can be said that in the 1990s we can observe a kind of secularisation and desacralisation in the celebration of Easter, just as in celebrations in general. People wish to live in the present and reject both the past and the future which are important components of the feast. With consumption and outward show people serve their own well-being in the present and their imagined or real social prestige. In this process desacralised Christmas has acquired the character of a celebration of love and the family. The content of Easter is still taking shape: a celebration of the rebirth of nature, the family and spring. For this reason its observance is still very malleable. The coming years will show which side of it is stressed by the community. For religious people Easter continues to be the biggest feast of Christianity, the commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus.

The social background and context

A process of marked secularisation and religious individualisation took place in Hungary (and the whole of Europe) in the second half of the 20th century. In the central and eastern part of Europe this process was set off when opposition to churches and religion was made an official state policy and historical materialism was a compulsory ideology.⁶ In countries to the west of Hungary the cause was the rapid loss of religion in the consumer society. As a consequence of all this, there was a change in the place and role of the Hungarian (and European) historical Christian religions and churches. A strong process of individualisation began. As a result the earlier strong connection between religion and culture, religion and identity, religion and feast culture was weakened or broken.⁷

As a consequence of the change in 1989/1990 in the political and legal system, religious ideals and thoughts flowed freely across the political borders and

⁶ Hungarian ethnology and cultural anthropology has not dealt with the consequences of the persecution of religion and the churches, when the activity of the churches was restricted to religious services. The churches lost the religion-based social institutions attached to them as they were banned by the socialist State. See: SUGAR 1989, RAMET 1991.

⁷ For further problematization see: McQUIRE 1997. 141–184., FURSET – REPSTAD 2006. 171, (especially) 75–96, 199–200.

within Hungarian society too, they crossed the social boundaries of the different social strata, classes and age groups. There was a loosening of the traditional forms in which religion and culture, religion and society, religion and ethnicity intertwined, while at the same time new connections arose.⁸

The dominance of the historical Christian denominations and churches has diminished. They have had to and still have to face the fact that numerous minor churches and movements of both eastern and western origin have targeted, reached and won over some of their followers. The individual (re)discovery of religion has played a much bigger role in this process than insistence on traditions. The emphasis has shifted from religion to religiosity, from institutionalized religions to private religiosity.

In our age marked by the loss of religion we can observe the desacralised form of the celebration of originally major church feasts (e.g. Easter), in which the traditional forms mingle with elements of the “profane religiosity”.⁹

It can be said that the individual’s search for security lies behind the different forms of celebrating Easter. Today in many places the post-modern world and the closed, rural and religious world are coming into conflict. The encounter is accompanied by clearly visible interferences. The secular is the factor with the stronger influence. The traditional, communal, rural, religious values are weakening, new celebrations are emerging, the new forms encountered in the more open world are beginning to operate in the religious world too. In addition, the consequences of the mingling of the global and the local can also be seen in our celebration in its present forms. The most visible signs of this are desacralisation: the feast is losing its traditional forms and all that is surviving of its ritualisation are elements related to the culture of consumption. Both its religious and its community building and strengthening roles are diminishing. Easter is becoming an occasion to celebrate the renewal of nature. The earlier contents and meanings are changing, and the regulating role of new, individual norms or rejection of the feast.

8 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 80–82.

9 As case study see: GULYÁS 2004. Theoretical background: SCHIEDER 1987, HAMMOND 1987, HASE 2001, SMITH 1996. 97–102.

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